

Wake Up with Jacob sermon series

#2 – Formed by A Dream

Gen. 28:10-19a

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This morning we pick up again the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis. If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you remember that we started off this sermon series by looking at Jacob's birth. Right away we knew that Jacob was trouble when we heard that he wrestled with his twin brother Esau while still in the womb. Not only were the two boys already in conflict, but their parents took sides, with father Isaac favoring Esau and Rebekah favoring Jacob. The sibling rivalry continued when Jacob tricked Esau into trading away his birthright for a bowl of soup, in effect making younger Jacob the inheritor of God's blessing instead of older brother and first-born son Esau. Jacob's deceitfulness made us wonder how God was going to use a person like him to carry on the promise of blessing first given to Jacob's grandfather Abraham.

Well, I wish I could say that Jacob saw the error of his ways and changed his tune after the soup incident. Instead, things got even worse. One day, Isaac, who was almost blind and very close to death, told Esau to go hunt some wild game for him, and when he returned Isaac would bestow upon Esau his fatherly blessing. Rebekah overheard this conversation and she conspired with Jacob to steal this blessing from Isaac. Jacob put on his brother's clothes, he fixed a nice meal, he even put animal skin on his hands to simulate Esau's hairiness. Then he went to Isaac and pretended to be Esau, and was given the father's blessing of success and prosperity. So, for the second time, Jacob lived up to his name as a deceiver who manipulated the situation to get the upper hand.

Guess how Esau felt when he found out what Jacob had done? Gen. 27:41 says, "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'" I have to say that I can't blame Esau for feeling this way. I also can't blame Jacob for what he does next: run! His mom warns him of Esau's rage, so Jacob high-tails it and hits the road to visit his uncle Laban in the far-away town of Haran.

That's where we are when we pick up the story today with our scripture reading. There's heavy symbolism at work here, and it doesn't bode well for the future of God's promise. Back in Genesis 12, God called to Jacob's grandfather Abraham while he was living in Haran and told him to pick up his belongings and go to the land that God would show him, where he and his family would be blessed by God. Now, Jacob, who is the bearer of that same promise, is fleeing the very land where Abraham had settled and returning to the starting point of Haran. Do not pass "Go," do not collect \$200. The future of the promise is in doubt: how will God carry on his promise of blessing through a liar and deceiver who is fleeing from the promised land and going into exile?

The scripture tells us that when Jacob reached a certain place, he stopped for the night. Names are important in the Bible, both for people and for places. So when a place doesn't have a name, it's not really a place at all. More truthfully, it's a place in between places. You've probably stopped at places like that on trips. I remember when I used to drive from Lexington to Louisville, I would sometimes stop for gas at Waddy, Kentucky.

There was nothing there but a rest stop. No restaurants, no hotels. It was a place in between places.

I don't know about you, but I've been at those places in my spiritual journey, as well. A place in between places. Like Jacob, it's a place where I'm running from what's behind me and I can't see where I'm going. God doesn't seem to be around anywhere, and there aren't any road signs to direct me. It's a spiritual Waddy. A place in between places.

Jacob stops to rest here, and finds nothing more comforting than a rock for a pillow, probably all the comfort he deserved. While sleeping, he has this famous dream about a stairway (some translations call it a ladder) with angels going up and down. Dreams can often be a manifestation of subconscious issues. I don't remember this, but Leigh said one time I cried out in my sleep, "Nacho man, come back!" I'm not sure what subconscious issue I was dealing with, maybe a need to visit Taco Bell.

Jacob had more serious issues that were coming to the surface. My Old Testament professor in seminary, Gerry Janzen, said that this story is actually a continuation of Jacob's struggling, first with Esau and now, during his exile, with God. You see, Jacob was the kind of person who liked to be in control, because when he was in control, he could manipulate the situation to extract the outcomes he wanted. He could prey upon his brother's impulsiveness to swindle his birthright, he could take advantage of his father's weaknesses to garner a blessing. When Jacob was awake he was in control, even if having control meant struggling with those around him.

We know people like this, people who like to be in control. And because we know people like this we know that one of the hardest things they can do is let go of their control, even if it means putting it in God's hands. I know we don't have any trouble with this, but some people have trouble putting things into God's hands. Jacob couldn't do that, because it would mean he was no longer in control.

So God comes to Jacob at the only time when he's not in control: while he is asleep. It's the only time of day when Jacob has no say over what happens. Janzen says that this dream of Jacob's represents the yearning in his soul for a connection with God, a connection that Jacob has been resisting during the waking hours. But now, Jacob has nowhere else to turn. He is on the run, he is in exile, he controls nothing, not even his own future. These ascending angels are Jacob's soul crying out to God for help, and the descending angels are God's answer to him. Sometimes it is when we are at our lowest points that we are most open to hearing God's voice inside and around us.

And that voice has something very important to say to Jacob. First, God reiterates the promise he had made to Abraham and Isaac: promise of land and offspring and blessing. But then, God adds something else, a message crafted specifically for a person in exile: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you."

"I am with you." Those words directly address what had to be Jacob's greatest fear: abandonment. None of us want to feel abandoned. It's why Molly clings to her mother's side all day long. It's why kids are so anxious on their first day of school. There's no feeling as lonely, as isolating, as the feeling of abandonment.

And there's no feeling like being found again. Why do you think dogs get so excited every time you come home? They've been found! They haven't been forgotten! "I am with you." That's the symbolism of the angels descending the stairway, and it

prefigures another time when God came down to earth in the form of a baby called “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us,” and when Jesus told his disciples right before he ascended into heaven, “I am with you always.”

It was this message that seemed to wake Jacob out of his life-long stupor. When he arises, he acknowledges the sacredness of this place in between places; he realizes God is even here, even in Waddy, Kentucky. There is no place we can go where God is not, and God’s promise of keeping us and watching over us knows no boundaries. For anyone in exile, the words of Psalm 121 feel like being found:

I lift up my eyes to the hills— where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip— he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Through this dream, Jacob has been awakened to God’s watchfulness, to God’s keeping of him and the promise. To honor the moment, he builds an altar and gives this no-place a name: Bethel, which means house of God. And he gives something else, something that previously he has been skilled only at taking from others: a promise.

Now, he IS still Jacob, so this vow comes with conditions. If God will watch over me and provide for me and give me clothes and get me back home... We can’t expect a complete turn-around in one night, can we? But although it’s conditional, it is a promise given by a promise-stealer. If God does these things, then Jacob says, “The Lord will be my God.” That’s the turning point. Up to this point, God has been the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac. For the first time, Jacob is acknowledging that God is also the God of Jacob, and Jacob promises to give back to God a portion of what he has received.

It is one thing to give intellectual assent to belief in a higher power; it’s quite another to say “the Lord will be my God.” Those of us who have made that claim in our lives know that there is no appropriate response to God’s presence with us other than to begin to give back to God what we have been given.

As this part of the story ends, Jacob is still in exile. He’s still running from Esau, and running to his uncle Laban, another seedy character we’ll hear about next week. But the nature of Jacob’s running has changed. No longer is he running scared or running alone. He’s not running from something. He’s running to something, or better yet into something, into the promise made to him by God, trusting that God will not leave him until God has done what God has promised. That’s a vow we can all claim as our own; for we are here this morning because we have given our lives to the One who descended the stairway and dwelt among us, the one called Emmanuel, God with us.